

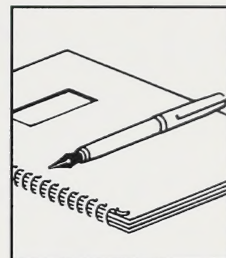
Heritage Notes

Planning for Heritage Resources

Research and Documentation

How to Research and Evaluate Government and Commercial Buildings

Janet Wright



Number 9



The Federal Public Building (Post Office) in High River was built in 1931-1932, from a plan by the Department of Public Works in Ottawa. Variations of this design can be found in smaller towns and cities across the country. Photo: National Archives of Canada, PA 52994.

Government and Business: Builders of the Community

The buildings of government and business form an important part of Alberta's built heritage. They dot the rural countryside and, more importantly, they shape our towns and cities and define the unique character and history of those communities. Town halls, post offices, courthouses, schools, firehalls and hospitals represent key landmarks within the community and they stand as symbols of those basic institutions and services of government. The buildings of business and commerce—the office buildings, banks, shops, theatres, warehouses and gas stations—are the building blocks of our main streets and our urban cores. The architectural legacy of government and

commerce provides tangible links with our past. In these buildings we can trace the history of our changing cultural values, political structures, public institutions and our social and economic development.

The following *Heritage Note* is intended to provide guidance and suggestions on researching government and commercial buildings in Alberta and evaluating their historical significance.

What is Evaluation?

All buildings are historically significant in that they tell us something of the people and communities that built them and of our past. However, no community or government can



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apply an equal level of designation and protection to all buildings. Heritage conservation and designation programs require some sort of selection process that will identify and give priority to those buildings or resources considered to be most important or in the greatest need of protection.

This selection is usually based on an evaluation of the building in terms of the historical themes with which it is associated and in terms of the historic integrity and the architectural quality of its design, construction and surrounding environment.

This process can be broken down into two basic steps:

1. Research and document the history of the building and assess its condition—both interior and exterior—and the character of its site and surroundings in relation to what is known of its original appearance.
2. Evaluate the building within the context of broader historical or architectural themes. This the most important step in the process.

DOCUMENTING THE BUILDING

The first step in determining historical significance is to assemble all the available information on the history of the building. A general guide to some of the most useful research resources for government and commercial buildings begins on page 6. How you use these sources will depend on the type of building and how much time you have to carry out the research. Some basic questions to be answered would include:

1. When was it built?
2. What was its original function?
3. For whom was it built?
4. Who were the architects, builders, and craftsmen associated with its design and construction?

5. How was it built? What type of construction? Of what materials?
6. How does the present building differ from the original design? How has it been altered or enlarged? Remember that the interior layout, finishes and fixtures are as important as the exterior design in understanding the building.
7. How has its function or ownership changed over the years?
8. What was the original character of the surrounding property, either in terms of its landscape features or associated buildings, and how has the property changed?

One of the most important sources of information is the building and the property itself. After carrying out the basic research, you should return to the site armed with any original plans, archival photographs or relevant documentation, and compare the existing building with what is known of its original design and construction. On-site assessment often reveals information about the building—original features, alterations to the structure and later uses—that may not be revealed through documentary research.

It is a good idea to take photographs of the building and make sketches of the floor and site plans while visiting the site. They will provide a permanent visual record of the building and free you from having to return to the site every time you need to compare the present fabric with the historical record. Current photographs are essential documents to support any application for designation and sketch floor and site plans will also be useful in later research.

EVALUATING HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Research is an important part of the evaluation process but this information alone is not enough to evaluate the historic importance of a building. To assess historical significance you

have to look beyond the building itself and explain its design and construction in terms of broader historic and architectural themes. In other words, what does this building tell us about the past, about the evolution of cultural and architectural values, political structures, public institutions and social and economic development? An evaluation of a building's historical significance also takes into consideration how well this individual building illustrates these broader themes, particularly in relation to other similar buildings that have survived. Is it the earliest, the best preserved, or the only surviving example of a particular type? Is it noted for its outstanding design qualities or does it provide a good, representative example of a common building type?

There are no set rules as to how one defines the appropriate context, but some of the factors or criteria which are most commonly considered in the evaluation process include historical associations; architectural value; structure, materials and craftsmanship; and the quality of the site and environment.

1. Historical Associations

An evaluation of a building's historical associations looks at those historical themes or forces—political, social or economic—that explain why the building was constructed, without necessarily explaining its physical or design characteristics. Government buildings derive associative value as important, representative or rare surviving examples of different phases in the evolution of Alberta's political structures and institutions, or as products of a particular government policy or program. The courthouse at Fort Macleod is an important historical resource as the oldest courthouse in the province and one of the few surviving examples of a public building erected by the government of the North-West Territories.

Commercial buildings may be associated with the development and growth of specific industries and businesses or with periods of significant growth and prosperity. The Barron Block in Calgary was an early product of the post war speculative building boom that was sparked by the discovery of the Leduc oil field



The Courthouse in Fort Macleod, Alberta was built between 1902-1904, from plans by the Chief Architect's Branch of the Department of Public Works in Ottawa. The building, which is the only surviving example of a North-West Territorial Courthouse, has been restored and now houses the town hall. Photo: Janet Wright, 1993.

The Barron Block in Calgary (right), which opened in 1951, was an early product of the post war boom in speculative building sparked by the 1947 discovery of the Leduc oil field. It had a movie theatre on the ground floor and oil company offices above. Photo: Janet Wright, 1993.



Roadside bungalow camps in the Rocky Mountains, such as Storm Mountain Lodge on the Banff-Windermere highway (center), provided a new type of tourist accommodation associated with the rise of automobile touring in the 1920s. Photo: Parks Canada, c. 1925.



The Normal School in Calgary (below) was built as a teacher training centre in 1906-1908 by the Alberta Department of Public Works. This imposing structure was a source of pride to many Calgarians, and described by one local booster as "the finest school in the Dominion." Photo: Glenbow Archives NA-2293-1.

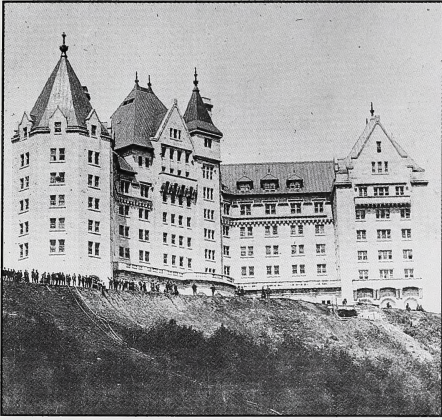


in 1947. Commercial buildings may also reflect the evolution of new types of services and facilities. The roadside bungalow camps in the Rocky Mountains provided a new type of tourist accommodation associated with the rise of automobile touring in the 1920s.

It is important to note that the historical significance of a building is not necessarily confined to one factor or criterion and often buildings should be evaluated from more than one perspective. The courthouse at Fort Macleod is the only surviving example of a territorial courthouse but it is also a good representative example of the solid, serviceable type of design developed by the federal government for its public buildings in the North-West Territories. The Barron Building in Calgary is a product of post war speculative development but it is equally important as an excellent example of early modern architecture in Alberta. The simple rustic design of the Storm Mountain Lodge represented a popular theme for resort architecture in Canada. Earlier settlers built similar structures out of necessity; in the 20th century these simple log cabins offered a romantic escape from urban life.

2. Architectural Significance

A building's architectural significance is determined by examining the physical characteristics of its interior and exterior design. Most commonly one thinks in terms of important public or commercial buildings designed by an established architect in the prevailing architectural style of the period. The Normal School in Calgary of 1906-1908 is a sophisticated example of the classical Beaux-Arts style which dominated public building in the first three decades of the 20th century. The Macdonald Hotel in Edmonton, with its steeply-pitched chateau-style roof and its richly-appointed interior, epitomized the luxury and elegance characteristic of the big railway hotels in Canada. The architectural and historical significance of these two buildings, which were intended to serve as imposing landmarks representing important public and



3. Structure, Materials and Craftsmanship

The way in which the building is put together—its structure, materials and the quality of the workmanship—often contributes to its historical significance. The evolution of construction technology in government and commercial buildings reflected the general historical development of the province. In the early settlement period construction was dependent on the materials at hand. The arrival of the railway and the development of new technologies greatly expanded the range of building materials available to Albertans. By the early 20th century, the introduction of the steel and reinforced concrete frame permitted the construction of multi-storied commercial buildings. New materials such as terracotta or pressed metal, which could be inexpensively moulded into elaborate decorative details, provided new design opportunities for all levels of building.

The marketing strategies of the large west coast lumber companies also had an impact on building. The development of pre-cut building materials which were sometimes packaged as entire pre-fabricated structures was most prevalent in housing and agricultural buildings but was also adapted to commercial buildings. The old bank at Bassano was built by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce according to standard plans developed by Toronto architects and pre-fabricated by a British Columbia lumber company.

The Macdonald Hotel in Edmonton (left), with its steeply-pitched chateau roof and richly-appointed interior, epitomized the luxury and elegance characteristic of the big railway hotels in Canada. It has been a landmark on the Edmonton skyline since it was built in 1915. Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta A5524.

commercial institutions, is easy to recognize and appreciate.

But architectural significance is not associated exclusively with large public buildings. The small commercial and government buildings that can be found in every community are just as important in preserving an image of the past as are those few outstanding architectural monuments generally found only in larger cities. The post office in High River is a typical example of a small federal building designed by the Department of Public Works in Ottawa. Variations of this design can be found in smaller towns and cities across the country. Like the logos and golden arches of today's fast food chains, these buildings provided an image of the federal government that was immediately recognizable to all Canadians. The small rural schoolhouses of the early 20th century, which were built according to a series of standard plans developed by the Department of Education, were modest in appearance but they tell an important story of the educational standards and the learning environment in rural Alberta during this period.

The architect, builder or craftsmen responsible for the design and construction of a building may contribute to the significance of the building although the fact that no architect or builder is identified with the structure does not necessarily decrease its significance.

An unusually elaborate example of a pressed metal facade found on a commercial block originally known as the Great West Saddlery and Food Store on Haultain (Second) Avenue in Fort Macleod; built 1904. Photo: Janet Wright, 1993.



Between 1905 and 1911, dozens of banks in small towns across western Canada were pre-fabricated by the B.C. Mills Lumber Company of Vancouver for the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. This bank at Bassano was based on a standard plan taken from designs prepared by the Toronto architectural firm of Darling and Pearson. It is now houses a law office. Photo: Janet Wright, 1993.



4. Site and Environment

Buildings are not isolated objects set on a neutral ground; they are part of a larger setting which includes the property on which they are placed and the other buildings and spaces that surround it. The historical integrity of a building's site and the character of its

immediate environment or streetscape should be considered in any evaluation. The historic value of a public building or a railway station is enhanced if its gardens are intact or its rail yards are maintained and still active.

The visual relationship with surrounding buildings is also an important factor in assessing architectural significance. The three commercial buildings on Second Street in Medicine Hat shown below are fairly typical designs of the period but together they form a cohesive grouping, similar in scale, materials and function, that preserves an image of a commercial main street of the early 20th century.

A GUIDE TO RESEARCH RESOURCES

Researching a building requires good detective skills and a certain amount of patience. The information is out there, it is simply a matter of knowing where to look and then putting all the pieces together to create a complete story. The following guide identifies some of the most useful research resources and briefly describes what type of information they will provide.

These three commercial buildings on Second Street in Medicine Hat, dating from about 1916, have recently been restored under the Alberta Main Street Programme. Similar in scale, materials and function, they preserve an image of a commercial main street of the early 20th century. Because their original relationship to each other is still intact, the significance of each building is increased. Photo: Sandy Aumonier, 1989.





The Fertile Forest School was built in 1915 according to a standard design developed by the Alberta Department of Public Works. It was one of many similar buildings erected across the province. Although extremely modest in design and construction, it met the minimum basic standards in classroom size, furnishings, lighting and heating as set down by the provincial Department of Education. Photo: David Capelazo, 1991.

This is not, however, a definitive list, as the types of records maintained by a community vary considerably. The best guide to the primary and secondary sources in your area will be the staff of your local library, museum or archives.

Government buildings are the easiest type of building to document. Their planning and construction, as well as their use and maintenance over the years, are carried on by large bureaucracies which generate detailed documentation on everything they do. Even small, inconspicuous buildings such as a garage or a picnic shelter built by a government will probably be listed somewhere, perhaps as an expenditure in the public accounts or in a summary of a department's yearly accomplishments, i.e., the annual report. In addition, all levels of government have a mandate to maintain many of these records and make them accessible to the public in federal, provincial and municipal archives.

Researching commercial buildings is not always as straightforward. The records of large corporations such as banks, department stores or prominent businesses are sometimes maintained in private or public archive collections but most commercial buildings were constructed by developers or small businesses for which no records survive. In

these cases the researcher must rely primarily on municipal property records and other local primary sources.

1. GOVERNMENT RECORDS: FEDERAL, PROVINCIAL AND MUNICIPAL

a. The Annual Report: Federal and Provincial

One of the best sources of information on government buildings is the annual report. At all levels of government, departments are required to submit a summary of the year's activities and expenditures which usually includes any building projects initiated during that year.

Annual reports of both the federal and provincial Departments of Public Works represent the richest source of information but not all government buildings were constructed under their control. Other useful sources include the reports of the Alberta Department of Education, the federal Department of National Defence, the Departments of Agriculture and many others. Remember to check the reports of the department which constructed the building and of the department

for which it was constructed. The annual reports are also a valuable source of information on how many other buildings of this type were constructed and whether the individual building being researched was unique or typical of the period.

The annual reports are also very accessible. Many larger libraries, such as the library of the Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Archives in Edmonton, the library of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, most university libraries or the central library of some municipalities, maintain Government Publications (or Documents) Sections, which would include these reports. The federal annual reports are often identified as part of the Sessional Papers of the House of Commons.

b. Government Documents: Manuscript Sources

The term “manuscript material” refers to the unpublished documents that are held either by the National Archives in Ottawa for federal buildings, the Provincial Archives in Edmonton for provincial buildings, or various municipal archives for local buildings. Documents relating to more recent projects are often located with the department that was responsible for their construction.

The documentation on government buildings typically includes the building specifications, construction estimates and a project correspondence file. On large projects these files can be extensive and time-consuming to go through and they may not provide any more information than you find from other sources. Municipal records (described below) represent a more accessible source and they often provide an interesting local perspective on the construction of an important federal or provincial building.

c. Municipal Records

Public building at a local level was carried out under the direction of the town or city council or by separate organizations such as the board of the local school, hospital or library. More recent records are often still with the

organization responsible, but older records (if they survive) may have been transferred to local or regional archives or museums.

Some cities and towns printed annual reports of the activities of their various departments. If these are not available, the minutes of the city or town council should contain references to new buildings as they were presented to council for approval. Council minutes are organized chronologically but sometimes a subject index has been provided. Official correspondence is maintained as part of the records of the city clerk.

School and hospital construction was administered by local boards but the provincial government was often responsible for establishing basic standards and guidelines and sometimes for developing standard architectural plans. For example the Fertile Forest School in rural Alberta was based on a standard design developed in 1915 for the provincial Department of Education, and now held at the Provincial Archives of Alberta in Edmonton.

d. Provincial and Municipal Property Records

The property records maintained by the province and municipalities can be used for researching all types of buildings. Alberta’s two land titles offices (one in Calgary and one in Edmonton) maintain a register of deeds and any legal document registered against a property such as mortgages or liens. Land titles will enable you to trace changes in ownership and may provide clues on construction. Tax assessment rolls are usually compiled by a municipality on a yearly basis. Organized by section and lot number, they list the owner’s name and an assessed value of the property alone and a value for any buildings or development on the property. A substantial rise in assessed values usually indicates new construction.

e. Corporate Records and Archives

Large corporations such as banks, financial institutions, and railway companies sometimes

maintain their own corporate archives which are usually located at their headquarters. In some cases records of small companies may be acquired by an archival institution. Once you know for whom the building was constructed you can check the *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories* which can be found in your main library. Once again this type of research may require a lot of work for little return. Concentrate on local and published material first and determine what gaps in the information need to be filled before turning to these less accessible sources.

2. PRIMARY PUBLISHED SOURCES

a. Local Newspapers

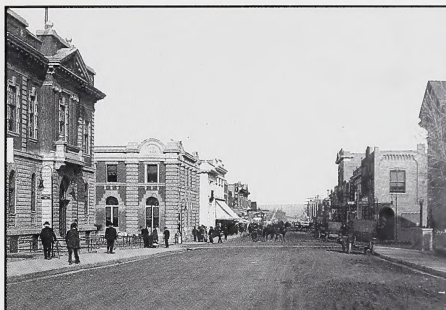
The construction of a new post office, school, hospital or important commercial building was often considered newsworthy by the local press and a building's opening or the announcement of the new project would be described in varying degrees of detail depending on the importance of the project.

Newspaper research can, however, be time-consuming and it is important to know first when and where to look. A newspaper item usually coincides with the completion of the building but an important public building such as a town hall or large federal building may be discussed at various stages of the project's development.

b. Journals

Magazines and periodicals are easier to research but they are much more selective in what they include. Some include yearly indexes and there are also a number of periodical indexes which help you to locate specific articles.

Journals with information on buildings fall into several different subject categories: architectural and construction journals and professional journals.



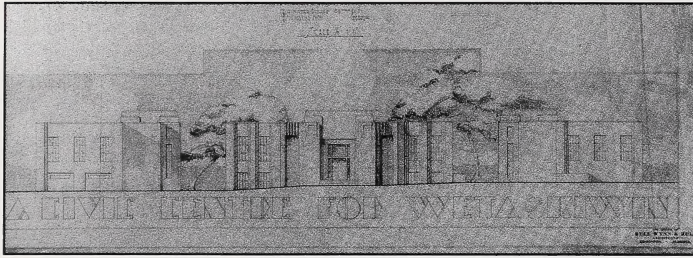
In the early years, journals such as *Canadian Architect and Builder*, *Construction*, *Contract Record* and *Engineering Review*, focused on central Canada but some Alberta buildings are illustrated. Some included yearly subject indexes and more recently indexes have been published on others.

Professional journals relate to specific professional groups or institutions. For example journals such as the *Canadian Banker*, the *Canadian Hospital* or various Canadian educational journals often include articles on planning and design. Even if publications such as these do not include specific references to the building being researched, they often provide information on general principles of planning, function and design. This is important for gaining an understanding of the building in its historical context.

c. City Directories

City directories were compiled for many towns and cities. They are generally organized by street address and list the occupants (not necessarily the owner) of each property. A directory such as *Henderson's* for Edmonton is a useful source for tracing changes in use and occupancy of a building. You can also use this source to learn about the history of adjacent properties, which will give you a rough sketch of the changing character of the street over many years.

Archival photographs, such as this view of Second (formerly Toronto) Street in Medicine Hat in 1913, are a useful research tool. The three commercial buildings shown above can just be made out on the left-hand side of the street. Although changes have taken place since this photograph was taken, many of the buildings survive and the general scale has been respected. Photo: Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery, PC328.149.



Architectural drawings can be misleading. They depict buildings as they were conceived by the architect but not necessarily as they were built. Changes may have been made in the course of construction or, as the case of these 1939 plans by Rule, Wynn and Rule for a new Civic Centre in Wetaskiwin, it may never have been built. Photo: Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary, Project No. 3905.

THE VISUAL RECORD

1. Archival Photographs

Old photographs bring the documentary evidence to life. They show how the building looked in the past and help identify changes to the building. They also often show original landscape features and general views of a building as part of a streetscape, and give an idea of its original context and how it has or has not changed over the years. Interior photos are harder to find but provide valuable information on parts of a building that are most susceptible to change.

2. Architectural Drawings

Architectural drawings reveal the building as it was originally designed and they also provide information on the construction and interior layout. A set of drawings would usually include a series of elevations (the exterior), floor plans, and sometimes a cross section of the building including interior details. Separate sets of structural, electrical and mechanical drawings are sometimes found for larger projects. However, architectural drawings can be misleading. They depict buildings as they were conceived by the architect but not necessarily as they were built. Changes may have been made in the course of construction or, as the case of these 1939 plans for a new Civic Centre in Wetaskiwin, it may never have been built.

The architectural plans for many federal government buildings are located at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa or with the department responsible for construction. The Provincial Archives, the Glenbow and

some municipalities also hold original plans. The Canadian Architectural Archives at the University of Calgary has acquired the drawings of some of Alberta's best known architects of the 20th century.

3. Municipal Plans and Fire Insurance Plans

Municipal governments produce urban plans when they lay out new streets, survey property lines or install new services or utilities. Sometimes buildings and their owners are identified on the plans but there is usually very little specific information on the building itself. Fire insurance plans are the most useful source for researching buildings. Prepared for insurance companies since the early 20th century in Alberta, they identify construction materials, number of storeys and roof shape of individual buildings. The name of the building is often given for commercial and government structures.

A NOTE ON SECONDARY SOURCES

Secondary sources—published or unpublished studies prepared by other historians—are the researcher's most valuable resource. Even if you cannot find anything written on your specific building, you will often find books, articles or research reports on buildings of a similar type or period or on related subjects, which will help place the individual building within its appropriate historical or architectural context.

Cast a wide net in your search for secondary sources. General histories of the province or region provide a good starting point and will help locate your building within the general framework of the development of the province. Local histories provide a more focused context and are useful for identifying periods of growth or the development of specific businesses, services or institutions. The type and quality of design will determine how you proceed from this point.

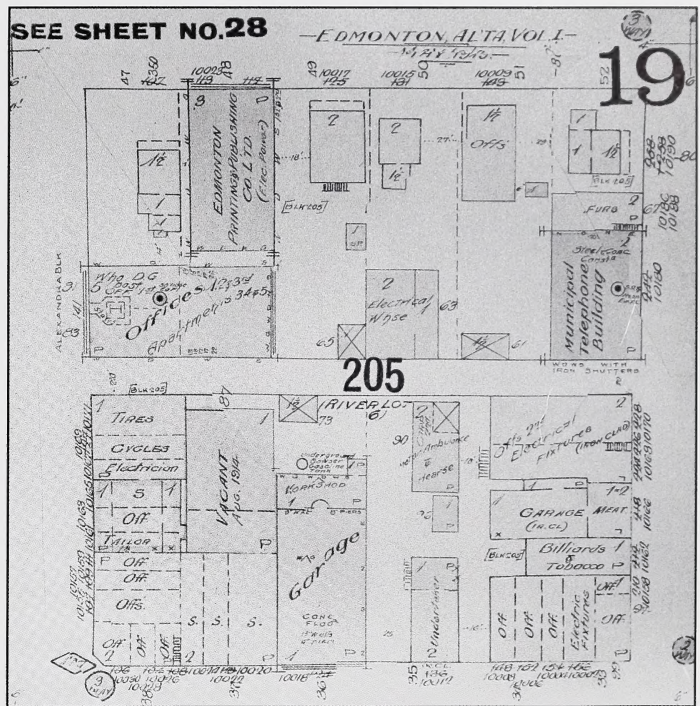
General architectural histories may help to evaluate a design in terms of broad stylistic trends but these studies tend to concentrate on the most outstanding architectural monuments and they are most relevant in assessing large, architect-designed buildings. Regional or local studies of historic buildings are more useful for assessing the more modest type of building found in most towns and cities. These studies are generally well-illustrated and should give you an idea whether your building was unusual or typical of the period.

Histories of public services, institutions or businesses represent other potential sources of information. For example, books and articles on the history of education, health services or financial institutions will enable you to relate the construction of a school, hospital or bank to the policies and programs promoted by these organizations or professions.

Many secondary sources are not available in published form. The heritage conservation or historic sites programs maintained by all levels of government carry out building research as part of the designation and conservation process. Most of these reports, which are kept by the individual programs, are not accessible through libraries or the usual archival institutions. The two largest government documentation centres with research on Alberta buildings are:

1. Historic Sites and Archives Service
Alberta Community Development
Old St. Stephen's College
8820 - 112 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2P8
2. Canadian Inventory of Historic Building Division
Parks Canada
Department of Canadian Heritage
Jules Leger Building,
Les Terrasses de la Chaudière
5th Floor, 25 Eddy Street
Hull, Quebec K1A 0H3

On a local level, the city planning department or, in some communities, the Alberta Main



Street Programme, may also be able to provide material. Early on in your research, write or phone these organizations to see if they have any information on your building or related studies that may be relevant to the evaluation.

Conclusion

We value the older buildings in our communities for many reasons. On a personal and subjective level we may like them because they are attractive, interesting or impressive to look at; they may evoke certain personal memories or associations; or, more generally, we value them because they are familiar to us. They provide a sense of continuity with our past and the past of earlier generations. The purpose of evaluation is to give these subjective values a precise historical meaning—to reveal through research what the building has to tell us about the institutions, individuals, and political, cultural and social values that shaped the history of the province.

Fire insurance plans are one of the most useful sources for researching buildings. Prepared for insurance companies since the early 20th century in Alberta, they identify the name, construction materials, number of stories and roof shape of individual buildings. This is a detail of a plate from an Insurance Atlas of Edmonton showing a block along Jasper Avenue. Photo: City of Edmonton Archives.



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Janet Wright is an architectural historian with the Architectural History Branch of Parks Canada in Calgary. A graduate of Queen's University, she received an MA in 1988 from the Department of Art History, with a thesis on federal building in Canada during the Depression. She has written on a wide range of topics within the field of Canadian architectural history, and has published several books and articles including *The Second Empire Style in Canadian Architecture* (with Christina Cameron, 1980) and *The Architecture of the Picturesque in Canada*, 1980. Recently, Ms. Wright completed a history of federal architecture from 1867 to 1967 for Parks Canada. An active participant in the preservation community, Ms. Wright has served on the City of Ottawa's heritage board and now co-chairs ICOMOS Canada's Historical Research Committee.

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